

Points to Ponder

Does It Have Pores?:

As with many books about books, *Fahrenheit 451* offers us

the chance to criticize the novel in terms of its own claims about literature. Think about Faber's little speech to Montag in Part 2, in which he talks about "quality" of literature. To Faber, great books are those which have "telling detail," "texture," which "show the pores in the face of life." Now think about *Fahrenheit 451* in the same terms. Do Bradbury's themes, symbols and characters seem, to you, to have "pores"? Do the thoughts and actions have "telling detail"?

As a way to get started, you might think about the book's imagery. Consider the way scenes are illuminated by many different kinds of light: a bedroom seen in the flickering flame of an igniter, a burning house seen from its dark lawn, a suburb bathed in moonlight, the flat fluorescent light inside a fire house or subway, the total darkness of the wilderness at night. Think of weather, and how a rainy afternoon seems to reflect -- or affect -- Montag's own sense of grief: why does nearly the entire book seem to take place indoors, in the rain, or at night? Think of indoor spaces, and how houses and fire stations are made to feel oppressive or welcoming, sterile or alive -- as well as how the outdoors is similarly described, in the city, the suburbs or the wilderness. Consider the way people themselves are described: the firemen as being composed of ashes and flame, Mildred as a pale, empty creature with a painted-on face, Clarisse as being radiant like a candle.

Of course, you don't have to just nod your head and say, "Sure, this is a well-written book." Lots of people find lots of problems in *Fahrenheit 451*. Some feel the characters are one-dimensional; others are annoyed by the pedantic, lecturing way they drop "speeches" into the middle of conversations. Still others complain about erratic plot construction (why does Clarisse simply disappear a third of the way through?) Others say Bradbury doesn't understand teenagers, women, technology... Think about what you admire or dislike in *Fahrenheit 451*, what speaks to you or what seems outdated or clichéd. After all, according to Faber, that's the whole point of what reading should help us do -- question received opinion (including mine), and think for ourselves!

Literary Secrets: One interesting detail about *Fahrenheit 451* is the way Bradbury conceals "secrets" within the text. And the book is rich in recurring images -- themes and symbols which show up in many forms during the course of the book, to create a sense of continuity or "resonance."

For instance, the very first scene of the book is a mystery: although we're grabbed by the exciting description of fire, it takes a few more pages before we actually begin to understand what it is Montag does. Later on, we see Montag looking and thinking about his ventilator grill several times before we -- the readers -- ever learn what it actually behind it. But when we do, we feel we should have known all along. The periodic noise of the jet planes in the background is easy to overlook when it first appears (while Montag is looking at the sleeping Mildred). But the noise becomes a subtle backdrop to the book, slowly growing louder and louder until it finally provides the book with its spectacular ending. And in one of the final scenes, when Montag has fled into the

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countryside as is walking through the dark forest, his foot suddenly strikes the side of the railroad track. The noise it makes reminds us of the sound his foot made when he kicked the empty bottle of sleeping pills, in his and Mildred's bedroom, in one of the first scenes of the book -- starting the series of changes which will overwhelm him.

Why do you think Bradbury does this? Do these "hidden secrets" make you want to go back and read the book again to look for them? Do you find it an annoying tendency in the writer? Or do you think it has anything to do with what Faber is talking to Montag about -- the "pores" of complex literature?

Changing With the Times: Although *Fahrenheit 451* is set in a not-too-distant future, it shows clear marks of the times it was written in (the book was first published in 1953). Think of its images of suburbia, with housewives who don't work and husbands who supply them with a never-ending stream of household appliances, its isolationist America and Internet-free social world, its men who go off to war when drafted and women who spend all day gossiping, watching TV, and popping sleeping pills to mask their unhappiness -- this landscape is fairly clearly a projection into the future which was based in the 1950s, not in the early twenty-first century.

We might say that other elements, perhaps more subtle, also make it clear that *Fahrenheit 451* dates back half a century. Think about some of the concerns which seem to preoccupy Bradbury in the book. Do any of them seem to you to be more relevant to the '50s than they are to us today? Do some remain as relevant now as they were then? Consider the book's apparent concern about: increasingly wild and violent youth culture; the increasing presence, speed and danger from cars; the seldom-discussed imbalance between the quality of living in the USA and other countries; the dangers of American warmongering; the declining level of public education for teenagers. Do some of these concerns seem outdated to you? Are some still cause for thought today?

Now: what about *Fahrenheit 451*'s condemnation of the speeded-up-ness of the world, so that people don't give themselves time to think and dream anymore? What about his apparent fear that TV and mass media are replacing human contact? How about his concern about the way people let their thinking about politics be guided and influenced by the "soft sell" of TV? Have these themes ceased to be relevant, or are they -- as some people suggest -- more important today than ever? If that is the case, does Bradbury's book, even with its 1950s imagery, still make their urgency seem immediate to us? Why or why not?

Finally, bear in mind that when Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451*, its central theme -- censorship -- was also a concern of the moment. It was published at the height of the "McCarthy era," during which Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy almost single-handedly created a sense of paranoia in the U.S. government which spread to affect all of U.S. culture, from Hollywood to high schoolers. McCarthy believed that the American government was infiltrated with Communist spies, and the result was a culture of concealment, suspicion, and suppression of potentially "subversive" ideas and literature. The year *Fahrenheit 451* was published, Bradbury is quoted as saying, "Whether or not my ideas on censorship via the fire department will be old hat by this time next week, I dare not predict. When the wind is right, a faint odor of kerosene is exhaled from Senator McCarthy."

Did You Know

Who Watches the Watchers?:

Fahrenheit 451 has itself been subject to censorship in various school systems. This is so ironic -

- given its anti-censorship theme! -- that these instances have garnered a lot of public attention.

Actually, the censorship had little to do with the book's subject matter; instead, parents have sometimes objected to the many uses of "hell" and "damn" in the original printing of the book.

Fahrenheit 451 has been censored or removed from reading lists several times in the 1990s alone, in places as far-flung as Mississippi and California. (In one famous instance, students were given copies of the book with the obscenities blacked out. Can you think of a more effective way to get them to take the book's subject matter seriously?)

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At the Movies: In 1966, *Fahrenheit 451* was made into a movie by highly respected New Wave French film director Francois Truffaut, starring British actress Julie Christie. The film received mixed reviews: it was said to be visually interesting, but critics complained that the dialogue was too stiff. The problem, it seems, was that Truffaut and collaborator Jean-Louis Richard were so excited about the project that they insisted on writing the screenplay themselves -- before either of them had fully mastered English! They were much happier, in the end, with the French-dubbed version. How this linguistic confusion might relate to the book's theme is left as an exercise for the student. Another curiosity of the movie is that the credits are spoken aloud, instead of printed -- in an obvious but clever echo of the book's theme of forbidden writing.

Fire Symbolism: As you've noticed, *Fahrenheit 451* is loaded with symbolism. One of its central "clusters" of images relates to fire: the number "451," the salamander, and the phoenix, all of which appear on Montag's fireman's shirt. (Clarisse sees them the first time she meets him, and seems to be fascinated by them.) "*Fahrenheit 451*," of course, is the temperature at which paper catches fire and burns. A "salamander" these days might be a little amphibious animal, but the name comes from ancient mythology: the salamander was believed to be a marvelous creature which could pass through fire without being hurt. (The firemen's fire truck is referred to as the "Salamander" a few times in the book.) And the phoenix is a bird from Asian myth, which was reputed to incinerate itself in flames every thousand years and be reborn out of its own ashes. This legend has a lot of useful symbolism for Bradbury, of course: Granger, the old man who leads the group of exiled humanists out in the wilds beyond the city, cites this myth after the city's bombing. His meaning is that humans, like the phoenix, are always burning themselves up. But we can also be reborn, and someday -- he hopes -- humans will learn enough to be able to stop the fire: to put an end to war, the destroyer of civilizations and life.